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Iowa Report Cites New Drug Threats, Urges Action

DES MOINES – A new Iowa report points to signs of an escalating synthetic drug abuse problem and an increase in methamphetamine and marijuana users needing treatment. Iowa's 2011 Drug Control Strategy, released by the State's Drug Policy Coordinator, also contains recommendations for addressing Iowa's latest drug control priorities.

"Synthetic drug abuse is the fastest growing category of substance abuse in Iowa, fueled by a continued increase in prescription medicine abuse, a resurgence in meth use and the emergence of synthetic marijuana products such as K2 and its successors," said Gary Kendall, who also serves as Director of the Governor's Office of Drug Control Policy. "The numbers and types of mood altering drugs is growing exponentially, and so too is the potential for abuse."

Consistent with a recent federal report, state drug agents and substance abuse treatment providers anecdotally report more cases of prescription drug abuse in Iowa. This comes against the backdrop of data from the Prescription Monitoring Program indicating painkillers Hydrocodone and Oxycodone made up 37.3 percent of all medicine (nearly 85 million doses) prescribed to Iowans last year.

"Teenagers tend to believe prescription medicines and products promoted as incense are safe," said Kendall. "This creates a risky situation, especially since many parents are not yet aware of the potential for the abuse of these substances."

Frequently sold as incense, K2 and other varieties of synthetic marijuana typically consist of dried herbs sprayed with chemicals that can produce a marijuana-like effect. Other known effects from using the synthetic hybrids include: anxiety, panic attacks, agitation, elevated blood pressure, rapid heart rate, vomiting, hallucinations and seizures. Following the June shooting death of an Iowa teen who had used K2, the Iowa Pharmacy Board adopted emergency rules to ban four synthetic marijuana compounds as Imitation Controlled Substances.

Even as new drugs surface, more Iowans are using methamphetamine and marijuana, while alcohol remains the most abused substance. Many Iowans with a substance abuse problem use multiple drugs.

Last year, the Iowa Department of Public Health reports marijuana was the primary substance of abuse for one-fourth of all treatment clients and more than 60 percent of juvenile treatment clients, the highest marijuana-related treatment rates in recent history. Meth was the drug of choice cited by 8.8 percent of all treatment clients last year, up from 7.8 percent the prior year. This coincides with an uptick in meth labs, including more of the new “one pot” and “shake and bake” types of labs, very high meth purity levels, an increase in meth lab-related child abuse cases and a rise in meth-related prison admissions.

“After making great strides combating meth in recent years, we must now redouble our efforts to protect Iowans from new meth threats, including when and how to report suspicious activity. Along these lines, Iowa’s new Pseudoephedrine Tracking System has already begun to show positive results by helping to detect and deter meth lab activity,” said Kendell.

In addition to reporting on current drug trends and responses, Iowa’s 2011 Drug Control Strategy outlines a series of forward-looking goals and objectives. The report also includes the following recommendations by Kendell to strengthen Iowa’s drug control efforts:

- Regulate synthetic marijuana products (K2, et al.), and the plant-based hallucinogen *Salvia divinorum*, by passing legislation to make them Schedule I Controlled Substances in Iowa.
- Strengthen Iowa’s Prescription Monitoring Program (PMP) to improve patient care by: lifting sunset language in the legislation establishing the PMP; requiring prescribers and pharmacists to consult the database; making PMP information sharing virtually real time; requiring the PMP to alert practitioners when abuse is suspected; and enhancing law enforcement access to the PMP.
- Require full substance abuse and mental health parity. This legislation will improve Iowans’ access to treatment, reduce crime, and retain workers in our state.
- Resist efforts to legalize the smoking of marijuana, or to change marijuana’s Schedule I Controlled Substance status in Iowa.
- Amend state law to expressly permit the use of Continuous Alcohol Monitoring devices on OWI offenders, as a way to better protect Iowans and reduce costs.
- Amend state law to fully comply with the federal Adam Walsh Act (Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act), to prevent a loss of federal drug-fighting grant funds.
- Consider creation of a Meth-Offender Registry, which would prohibit convicted meth offenders from purchasing any pseudoephedrine products used to make meth.
- Update educational efforts to increase awareness of the new versions of meth labs so that retailers, landlords and all Iowans know how to protect themselves and report suspicious activity.
- Create a Media Education and Literacy initiative that teaches young Iowans how to decode product marketing messages. By understanding the motives and objectives of these messages, teenagers will be equipped to make healthier choices.

“Education is required to make Iowans aware of all drug threats, new and old, and especially those faced by our youth,” said Kendell. “Those of us who are parents or key influencers must send a clear message to children that drugs like marijuana are illegal because they can be harmful, and it’s not safe to use alcohol, tobacco or other drugs—including medicines or obscure products like K2—unless they are prescribed for you by a doctor or given to you by a trusted adult.”

The complete 2011 Iowa Drug Control Strategy can be viewed at: www.iowa.gov/odcp.

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